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ABSTRACT

Available evidence does not support the notion that aging is associated with increasingly conservative social and political attitudes, or the idea that attitudinal rigidity is the norm among older cohorts. To examine whether aging is associated with attitudinal rigidity, nine surveys from the National Opinion Research Center were analyzed to determine whether older cohorts have kept pace with or lagged behind younger cohorts on the issue of sexual morality. Mean score trends were traced over a 10-year span and the direction of attitude change was determined for five cohorts. Scores were adjusted for possible compositional effects due to educational attainment and sex, and examined for inter-cohort and intra-cohort differences. Results of the analysis of the premarital sexual relations item indicated that liberal, tolerant, or permissive attitudes were more prevalent among the younger cohorts than among the older cohorts, but there were no indications that the older cohorts had become more conservative over the period encompassed by the surveys. Equally stable patterns were characteristic of the younger cohorts. Analyses of the extramarital sexual relations and homosexual relations items revealed the same pattern. Attitudinal rigidity appears to be no more characteristic of older persons than of younger persons. (LLL)

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AGING AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SEXUAL MORALITY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Antonio, Texas, November 20, 1984.

AGING AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SEXUAL MORALITY

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes cohort changes in attitudes about sexual morality over the period 1972-1982. The attitudes of the older cohorts are significantly less permissive than those of the younger cohorts, but there is no evidence of a conservative shift. Further, the attitudinal stability displayed by the older cohorts might be construed as indicating rigidity or inflexibility were it not for the fact that the younger cohorts also display the same stable patterns.

The "graying" of the American population has been accompanied by concerns about the consequences of an aging society. Some of these concerns are grounded in well-documented evidence about characteristic age-related changes. For instance, the demand for health-care services, facilities, and personnel is expected to grow steadily as the numbers and proportions of older persons, and especially the "old-old," increase (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1984; Department of Health and Human Services, 1984). Other expressions of alarm, however, are more speculative and derive their support from untested assumptions about presumed modal changes associated with aging. For example, the report of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (1972: 69) stated that "one concern often expressed about an older age structure is that there will be a larger proportion of the population who are less adaptable to social and political change, thus suggesting the possibility of 'social stagnation.'" Similar themes are noted by Lincoln Day (1978: 27) in an article describing possible consequences and characteristics of a zero population growth society:

> One well-known economist-demographer has averred that a society with the older age structure of a stationary population "would not be likely to be receptive to change and indeed would have a strong tendency towards nostalgia and conservatism," and a French writer has characterized such a population as one of "old people ruminating over old ideas in old houses."

These views do not appear to be limited to academic comment-

ators. Evidence from the 1974 "Myth and Reality of Aging in America" survey (Harris and Associates, 1975: 46-53) suggests that the public-at-large perceives older persons in much the same way. Only 19% of the respondents 18-64 years of age and only 34% of the respondents 65 years of age and older saw most people over 65 as being very open-minded and adaptable. (Interestingly, 63% of the older respondents viewed themselves as very open-minded and adaptable.)

These images of older persons as clinging to the past and as being resistant to change reflect two widely-held assumptions about aging. The first is that social and political attitudes tend to become more conservative as persons grow older. Implicit in this notion is the position that attitude change does occur, but that such change is typically in the direction of adopting more conservative and traditional attitudes. Thus, social change is opposed, social order is more highly valued, authority and obedience are emphasized, and a more restrictive stance toward human behavior is adopted (Glenn, 1974; Smith, 1982). In contrast, the second position suggests that attitude change ceases to occur. Rather, rigidity and inflexibility are said to characterize older persons. The underlying assumption, then, is that the rate of attitude change progressively diminishes and stops altogether as persons become "set in their ways" (Lapsley and Enright, 1983; Ryder, 1965). In its popular, and perhaps crudest, form, this notion finds expression in the familiar saying "you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Some recent evidence, however, is beginning to cast considerable doubt on the empirical validity of these views. Findings from these few studies provide tentative support for the conclusion that there is no inevitable drift toward conservative social and political attitudes with aging, nor is aging necessarily associated with attitudinal rigidity or inflexibility.

Using the 1954 survey on which Stouffer's COMMUNISM, CONFORMITY, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES (1955) was based and data from the 1972 National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, Cutler and Kaufman (1975) traced the direction and extent of intra-cohort changes in tolerance of civil liberties. Had the older cohorts become increasingly intolerant over the 18-year period, such a finding might have provided support for an aging-conservatism hypothesis. Had the attitudes of the older cohorts remained unchanged, the aging-rigidity position might have been supported. However, the data clearly demonstrate the existence of attitude change within all cohorts -- attitude change in the direction of greater tolerance. The findings also disclosed a rather clear pattern of inter-cohort variation in the extent of change: younger cohorts changed to a greater extent than older cohorts. Consequently, inter-cohort differences in tolerance in 1954 became more pronounced by 1972 as a result of the variable rates of change, even though the attitudes of all cohorts moved in the same direction. These findings were later confirmed by Nunn, Crockett, and Williams. Using the same 1954 Stouffer data coupled with a national survey conducted in 1973 by Response

Analysis Corporation, they conclude that "there is no support for the idea that growing older brings about lowered political tolerance," that there are "increases in tolerance for each birth cohort," but that "the propensity to increase in political tolerance from 1954 to 1973 is clearly greater for the two younger birth cohorts than for the older cohort" (Nunn et al., 1978: 85).

Additional evidence in support of this pattern of attitude change is provided by Glenn (1980: 609-618). His analysis examines the direction and extent of change within five cohorts on reported approval of the admission of Communist China to the United Nations (1954 to 1964-65) and on reported willingness to vote for a Black, a Jew, and a Catholic, respectively, for President (1959 to 1969). With the exception of willingness to vote for a Black for President, the results conform to the pattern of change in a liberal direction within all cohorts, but at a slower rate among the older cohorts (see also Ferree, 1974). Studies of gender role attitudes (Thornton et al., 1983; Holahan, 1984) have also noted a similar pattern of change toward less traditional attitudes, coupled with inter-cohort variation in the rate of change.

Such evidence has led some (Glenn, 1980; Sears, 1981) to propose an "aging-stability" hypothesis, a model positing change within all cohorts, but with a decreasing propensity for change among the older cohorts. Yet, the results of still other studies raise doubts about the universality of the aging-stability model

as a description of attitude change. In one analysis, Cutler et al. (1980) examined intra-cohort changes in attitudes about the legalization of abortion over the period 1965 to 1977. The findings from this study show that reported support for legalized abortion increased at approximately the same rate for all cohorts. Similarly, Smith (1981) has analyzed intra-cohort changes in tolerance of school desegregation between 1954 and 1977. His data show evidence of increasing tolerance within each cohort and the maintenance of constant between-cohort differences over the entire period. In other words, the rate at which tolerance of school desegregation increased among the older cohorts was approximately the same at which tolerance increased among the younger cohorts (see also Cutler, 1983).

Thus, the available evidence does not appear to support the notion that aging is associated with increasingly conservative social and political attitudes or the idea that attitudinal rigidity is the norm among older cohorts. Instead, during times of growing liberalism in public opinion, older cohorts appear to be part of that trend. The findings do, however, present a mixed picture on the issue of whether aging is associated with a propensity for attitudinal stabilization.

The present investigation examines these issues from the perspective of still another substantive area: attitudes about sexual morality. This domain is of interest because it taps a central facet of the liberal/conservative dimension, one that Smith (1982: 3) has labeled as "permissiveness," that is "tolerating

and often approving of nontraditional life styles and practices." Also, recent trends among the general population on sub-dimensions of attitudes about sexual morality appear to be of two types: attitudes about premarital sexual relations have been shifting in the direction of greater permissiveness, while attitudes about extramarital sexual relations and homosexual relations have shown little change during the 1970s and early 1980s (Smith, 1982). In the case of attitudes about premarital sexual relations, it will be of interest to determine whether older cohorts have kept pace with or lagged behind younger cohorts on an issue seemingly characterized by liberal trends. For extramarital sexual relations and homosexual relations, it will be of interest to determine whether stability characterizes all cohorts, and not just the older ones, a finding which would directly address the question of whether aging is associated with attitudinal rigidity.

Methods

SURVEYS

The data for this analysis come from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys. Nine surveys, covering the period 1972-1982 and representing the noninstitutionalized adult population of the United States, are used in the analysis. (Details about the sampling designs in the General Social Surveys may be found in Davis and Smith, 1984). The years in which the surveys were conducted and the total N for each are as follows:

1972 (N = 1,613); 1973 (N = 1,504); 1974 (N = 1,484); 1975 (N = 1,490); 1976 (N = 1,499); 1977 (N = 1,530); 1978 (N = 1,532); 1980 (N = 1,468); 1982 (N = 1,506).

MEASURES

Three items are available with which to measure attitudes about sexual morality. The items, the response categories, and the years in which the questions were asked follow:

1. There's been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all? (1972, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1982)

2. What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner -- is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all? (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1982)

3. What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex -- do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all? (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1982)

Responses on each item were scored from 1 ("always wrong") through 4 ("not wrong at all"), and respondents with missing data were excluded from the analyses.

ANALYSIS DESIGN

The general analytical strategy to be used is the cross-sequential design (Schaie, 1965; Riley et al., 1972). This approach compares a dependent variable score for a sample of a (birth) cohort at one time with the dependent variable score(s) of one

or more independent samples of that same cohort at later times. Examining the scores of several cohorts in this manner yields descriptive information about the direction of intra-cohort changes as well as information about inter-cohort variation in the extent of change. Table 1 describes the specific design to be used in this analysis -- that is, the five cohorts on which comparable attitudinal and background data are available in the nine surveys.

Table 1 about here

If the mean score on each of the sexual morality items for each cohort is entered into the implicit cells in Table 1, several types of evidence bearing on the central research questions will be provided. First, by tracing the trends in a cohort's mean score over the 10-year span, the existence and direction of attitude change can be determined for each of the five cohorts. Second, such data allow for an assessment of the extent of attitude change. In the simplest case, the 1972 score can be subtracted from the 1982 score to generate a measure of overall change for each of the cohorts on each of the items. These differences can then be compared to determine whether the older cohorts have changed to a lesser, to a greater, or to the same extent as the younger cohorts. Finally, other statistical information (to be described below) is also available that can be brought to bear on the question of whether inter-cohort differences are converging, diverging, or being maintained at constant levels.

However, one problem with the use of this type of design needs to be mentioned. It is well known that the size of older cohorts decreases over time due to mortality, but it is also the case that the characteristics of persons lost through death are not randomly distributed. Among the major sources of differential attrition through mortality are sex and socioeconomic status. These compositional changes occurring with the passage of time typically lead older cohorts to contain an increasing proportion of women and an increasing proportion of persons of higher socioeconomic status. The problem for the cohort analyst is that these compositional changes which accompany cohort flow can affect the dependent variable of interest if that variable is related to the dimensions along which differential attrition takes place. To be more concrete, if differential attrition produces a cohort with an increasingly higher average level of educational attainment, and if permissive attitudes about sexual morality are more prevalent among persons with higher levels of educational attainment (Glenn and Weaver, 1979), the change in educational composition will have the artifactual result of producing more permissive scores for a cohort, even if no attitude change is occurring among individual members of that cohort. The implication, then, is that "true" change must somehow be separated from attitude change due to compositional effects.

DATA ANALYSIS

One approach to the problem of controlling for compositional

effects is to examine cohort scores on the sexual morality items after statistically removing effects associated with sources of differential attrition. By partialling out effects due to variables such as education and sex and then examining scores on the dependent variables, some assurance is provided that observed intra-cohort attitude changes are not attributable to changing cohort composition.

This is accomplished through the use of Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) (Andrews et al., 1967). This multivariate technique yields adjusted net mean scores on a dependent variable for each category of a predictor variable after the effects attributable to other predictors are partialled out. Thus, for each survey, MCA will produce the mean attitude score for each cohort adjusted for possible compositional effects due to educational attainment and sex. Examination of these net mean scores within cohorts over time will indicate the patterns of intra-cohort change, while examination of inter-cohort differences over time will yield additional information about the maintenance, convergence, or divergence of these differences. Evidence bearing on these latter questions will be provided by the partial correlation ratios (betas) produced by MCA and by F-tests for assessing the statistical significance of the net or adjusted effects. The partial correlation ratios may be used as an indication of whether inter-cohort differences are increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. Similarly, comparison of the tests of statistical significance will give

additional information about variability in the magnitude of the inter-cohort differences.

Results

The results of the analysis of the item concerning premarital sexual relations are given in Table 2 and in Figure 1. Several aspects of these data are of interest. First, statistically significant inter-cohort differences are in evidence in each of the six surveys. Without exception, linear patterns characterize the inter-cohort differences with liberal, tolerant, or permissive attitudes being more prevalent among the younger cohorts than among the older cohorts. Second, although these data suggest, in cross-section, that the older cohorts tend to be more conservative, there are no indications that the older cohorts have <u>become</u> more conservative over the period encompassed by the surveys. The net mean scores of the two oldest cohorts have not changed appreciably. Between 1972 and 1982, there is a .07 increase for the oldest cohort and a .23 increase for the second oldest cohort. Indeed, the relative absence of change might be taken as evidence supporting attitudinal rigidity were it not for the fact that equally stable patterns are characteristic of the younger cohorts. Increases in permissiveness over the decade amount to only .04, .26, and .05 points for the youngest, second youngest, and middle cohorts, respectively. That stable patterns appear to exist for each of the five cohorts in their attitudes about premarital sexual relations is also suggested

clearly by the graphic representation of the data in Figure 1. The trend lines for each cohort vary slightly over time, but the overall impression they convey is the absence of major and consistent change in either a conservative or a liberal direction.

Table 2 and Figure 1 about here

The results of the analysis of the item on extramarital sexual relations presented in Table 3 and in Figure 2 reveal much the same pattern. Statistically significant inter-cohort differences exist in each of the six surveys with permissiveness being more characteristic of the younger cohorts than of the older cohorts. Intra-cohort changes occur, but in this instance they are in the direction of less permissive attitudes. However, these changes are found within each of the five cohorts, the largest decrease occurs in the youngest, but, more importantly, none of the changes is of great magnitude. The impression of intra-cohort stability suggested by the data in Table 3 is reinforced by the graphic representation of the data in Figure 2. The trend line for each cohort is largely flat, albeit with minor fluctuations over time. There is no indication of a unique and pronounced shift toward greater conservatism among the older cohorts, nor do the trend lines suggest a degree of attitudinal rigidity that is characteristic of the older cohorts alone.

Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

Table 4 and Figure 3 present the results of the analysis

of changes in attitudes about homosexual relations. The findings are largely consistent with those for premarital and extramarital sexual relations. Although the inter-cohort differences within each survey are not nearly as linear, it is still the case that the older cohorts are less permissive than the younger cohorts, and the differences are all significant at the .001 level. Four of the five intra-cohort changes between 1973 and 1982 are in the direction of greater intolerance. The exception is the second youngest cohort which records a slight increase from 1.53 in 1973 to 1.61 in 1982. Still, the decreases over the nine year period tend to be minor, with the largest difference (among the youngest cohort) being -.14 on the four-point scale. Once again, the data do not suggest a propensity toward more conservative attitudes which is restricted to the older cohorts, nor are there indications in Table 4 or Figure 3 that stability or attitudinal rigidity is an exclusive property of the older cohorts. Rather, minimal change in attitudes about homosexual relations appears to characterize all of the cohorts during this period.

Table 4 and Figure 3 about here

Summary and Discussion

It is widely assumed that aging is associated with increasingly conservative social and political attitudes or with attitudinal rigidity. Yet, studies which have traced changes in sociopolitical attitudes, at either the cohort or the individual level, have

failed to provide empirical support for these suppositions. During times of growing liberalism in public opinion, the attitudes of older persons have changed in a manner that is directionally consistent with changes exhibited by younger persons. In some areas, liberal change has been at a slower rate among older persons, giving rise to an "aging-attitudinal stabilization" hypothesis. In other areas, attitude change among older persons has been in the same liberal direction and at the same rate as the change exhibited by younger persons.

In this paper, another relevant attitudinal domain -- attitudes about sexual morality -- has been examined. Data from nine nationally representative surveys of the adult population of the United States, covering the period 1972-1982, were used. Based on three single-item indicators of attitudes about premarital and extramarital sexual relations and about homosexual relations, attitude changes within five cohorts were traced over this period.

The findings disclosed a consistent pattern across the three items. Changes among the older cohorts were minimal. If these results had been based on data from the older cohorts alone, one might have been tempted to conclude that aging has resulted in the rigidification of attitudes about sexual morality. Support for this conclusion erodes, however, when it is noted that the absence of change is also characteristic of the younger cohorts.

These findings differ, then, from the results of studies

of other attitudinal domains in that there is no evidence of increasingly liberal or tolerant attitudes among the older cohorts. Yet, the findings are in basic agreement insofar as there are no indications in the data of an inevitable tendency toward conservatism among the older cohorts. Similarly, attitudinal "rigidity" appears to be no more characteristic of older persons than of younger persons given that changes were minimal for all cohorts.

If models positing conservatism or rigidity with aging are not supported by these findings, do the results bear on other models that have been proposed? The "aging-stability" or "stabilization" model (Glenn, 1980; Sears, 1981) suggests a pattern in which directionally consistent changes occur among all cohorts, but at a decelerating rate for the older ones. However, the data would not appear to fit that model given the absence of pronounced differential rates of change. The model that appears to be most consistent with these data, as well as earlier findings on attitudes about race relations (Smith, 1981) and support for the legalization of abortion (Cutler et al., 1980), is one which suggests that the social and cultural forces influencing attitudes (and changes therein) have been uniform across cohorts. Such a "constant" or "period" effect model would lead us to expect change in the same direction and to the same extent among all cohorts when public opinion at-large is moving in a liberal (or conservative) direction. When the forces of change are absent (or offsetting), the model would

predict stability among all cohorts, as appears to be the case with attitudes about sexual morality.

In sum, the basic finding that aging is not necessarily accompanied by attitudinal rigidity or by an inevitable drift toward conservative sociopolitical attitudes now seems fairly robust. We have perhaps reached the point where further research should extend the range of issue areas, but with the objective of specifying conditions under which the rate or extent of change varies. That is, in which attitudinal domains and for which types of sociopolitical issues does an aging-stabilization model fit the data better and for which is a period or constant effects model the more appropriate?

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Table 1. Specific Representation of the Cross-Sequential Design

	Age in:								
Birth Cohort	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982
1943-1954	18-29	19-30	20-31	21-32	22-33	23-34	24-35	26-37	28-39
(N)	(386)	(389)	(384)	(397)	(392)	(372)	(466)	(399)	(364)
1933-1942	30-39	31-40	32-41	33-42	34-43	35-44	36-45	38-47	40-49
(N)	(268)	(284)	(218)	(252)	(235)	(260)	(241)	(190)	(192)
1923-1932	40-49	41-50	42-51	43-52	44-53	45-54	46-55	48-57	50-59
(N)	(284)	(236)	(223)	(234)	(200)	(229)	(198)	(202)	(195)
1913-1922	50-59	51-60	52-61	53-62	54-63	55-64	56-65	58-67	60-69
(N)	(253)	(241)	(203)	(194)	(206)	(220)	(198)	(203)	(177)
-1912	60+	61+	62+	63+	64+	65+	66+	68+	70+
(N)	(337)	(277)	(252)	(265)	(272)	(206)	(220)	(174)	(154)

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Table 2. Net Mean Scores[a]: Premarital Sexual Relations[b,c]

Birth Cohort	1972	1974	1975	1977	1978	1982
1943-1954	2.98	3.08	3.15	3.12	3.16	3.02
1933-1942	2.46	2.51	2.59	2.64	2.63	2.72
1923-1932	2.35	2.46	2.45	2.47	2.37	2.40
1913-1922	2.15	2.02	2.25	2.23	2.23	2.38
-1912	2.01	1.93	2.01	2.06	2.09	2.08
Total	2.42	2.48	2.56	2.58	2.63	2.62
p[d]	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Beta	.293	.364	.342	.307	.335	.263

[a]Controlling for education and sex.

[b]Scores range from 1 (restrictive) to 4 (permissive).

[c]The Ns on which this analysis is based are given in Table 1.

[d]$F_{(net)}$-tests for cohort differences.

Table 3. Net Mean Scores[a]: Extramarital Sexual Relations[b,c]

Birth Cohort	1973	1974	1976	1977	1980	1982
1943-1954	1.72	1.65	1.64	1.57	1.46	1.52
1933-1942	1.49	1.52	1.63	1.46	1.65	1.46
1923-1932	1.46	1.36	1.43	1.48	1.44	1.41
1913-1922	1.37	1.22	1.43	1.27	1.35	1.30
-1912	1.33	1.20	1.27	1.26	1.28	1.21
Total	1.50	1.42	1.50	1.43	1.44	1.41
p[d]	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.002
Beta	.175	.232	.175	.157	.138	.139

[a]Controlling for education and sex.

[b]Scores range from 1 (restrictive) to 4 (permissive).

[c]The Ns on which this analysis is based are given in Table 1.

[d]$F_{(net)}$-tests for cohort differences.

Table 4. Net Mean Scores[a]: Homosexuality[b,c]

Birth Cohort	1973	1974	1976	1977	1980	1982
1943-1954	1.93	2.01	1.89	1.94	1.81	1.79
1933-1942	1.53	1.54	1.72	1.53	1.59	1.61
1923-1932	1.68	1.61	1.59	1.66	1.50	1.62
1913-1922	1.52	1.35	1.55	1.46	1.41	1.43
-1912	1.38	1.33	1.41	1.42	1.34	1.29
Total	1.63	1.62	1.66	1.64	1.58	1.60
p[d]	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001
Beta	.178	.248	.159	.183	.167	.158

[a]Controlling for education and sex.

[b]Scores range from 1 (restrictive) to 4 (permissive).

[c]The Ns on which this analysis is based are given in Table 1.

[d]$F_{(net)}$-tests for cohort differences.

Figure 1. Premarital Sexual Relations

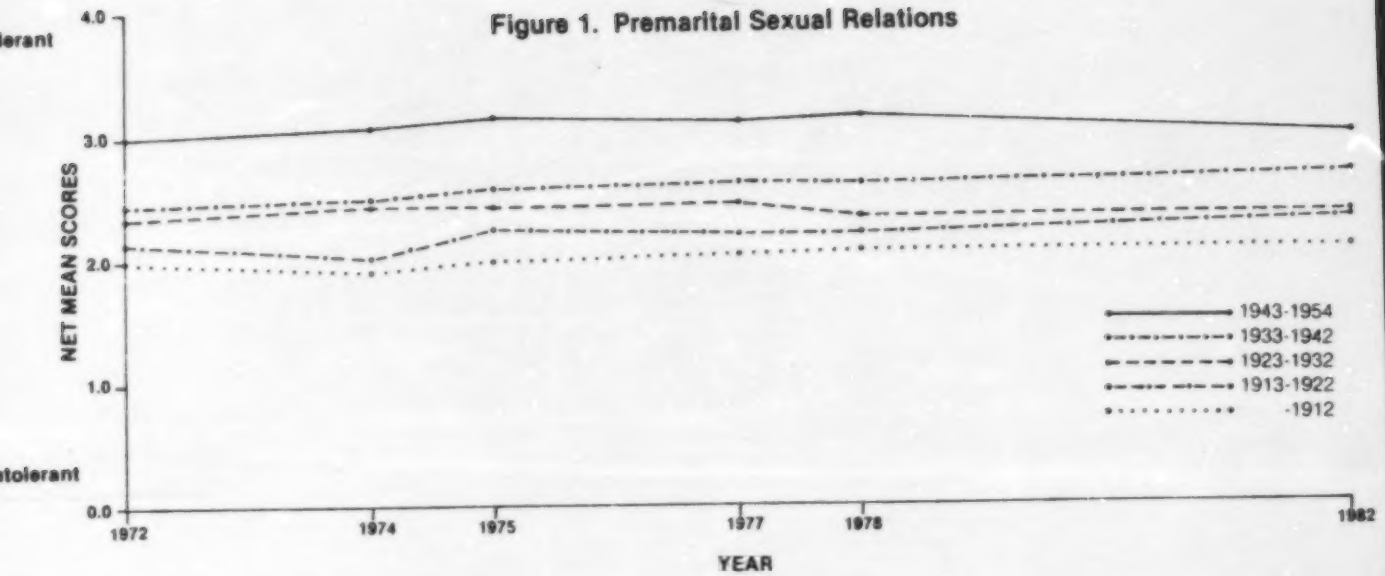

Figure 2. Extramarital Sexual Relations

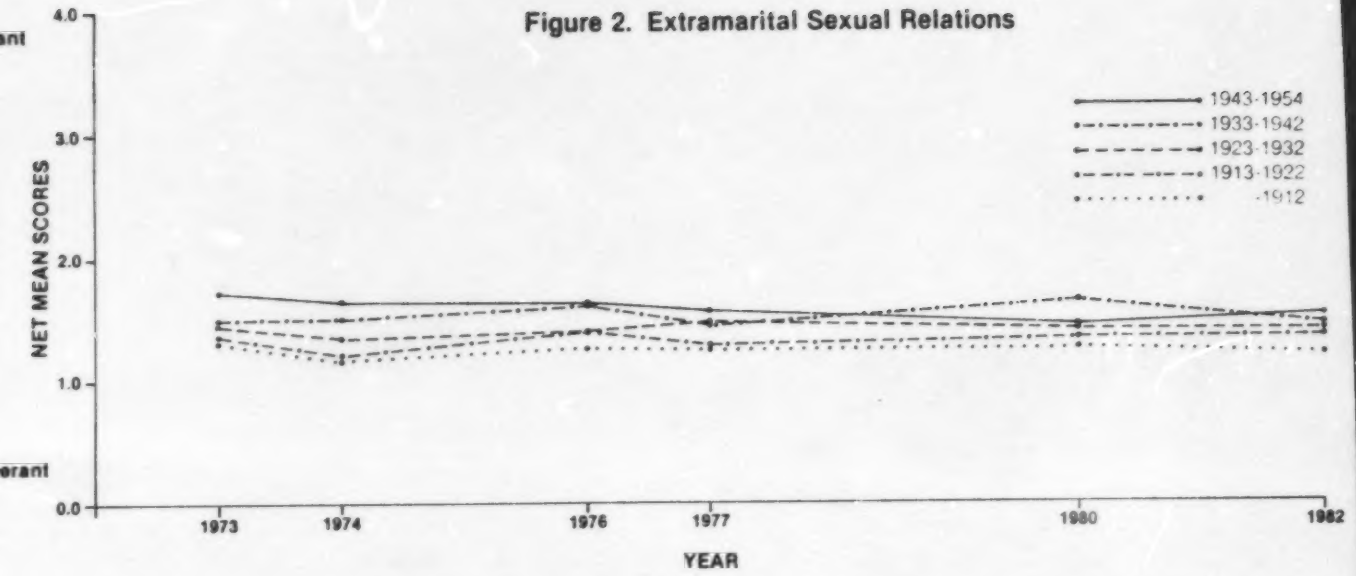

Figure 3. Homosexuality